CHAPTER IX

RELIGIOUS OCCASIONS AND LOCAL CUSTOMS

RAMADAN

796 785 [805] THIS fast, which is the name of a month in the Islamic calendar, has often been described as the Moslem Lent. During Ramadan there is a complete ban on eating, drinking and smoking during the hours of daylight. The Moslem day begins at sunset, and each evening during Ramadan the setting of the sun is announced by the firing of guns in various towns, the signal that eating and drinking may commence. Two meals are eaten during the night, the first as soon as possible after sunset and the second shortly before dawn. It is often the custom to break the fast with a drink of butter-milk, before proceeding to the heavy eating. After the first meal is over people in Bahrain go visiting and sit in the coffee-shops and cinemas. At the beginning of Ramadan, all through the night the town is busy with the coming and going of the people, radios and gramophones play at full blast in the coffee-shops and night is turned into day. Later in the month there is some slackening of activity, people return earlier to their homes and endeavour to get some sleep, but they are soon awakened by the drummers who go around the town before dawn waking the sleepers so that they may eat before it becomes light. Of necessity the non-Moslem follows the Islamic time-table during this month, for he is usually kept awake by the activity in the streets, and if he does succeed in getting to sleep he is soon awakened by the persistent drummers on their rounds.

According to Moslem Law eating, drinking and smoking must cease directly it is possible to discern the difference between a black and a white thread, but it is now the custom in Bahrain towns to fire guns to announce the break of day. During the day in Ramadan life moves at a slower pace than during the other months of the year, and this is especially true when Ramadan falls in the summer, for the combination of no food and drink and the heat and dampness of Bahrain reduces peoples' energy. [691] It is noticeable that there are more court cases about domestic troubles during Ramadan while the serious crimes decrease. In the evenings in this month the townsfolk go out to the gardens and sit in the shade of the trees waiting for darkness to fall. Adari is particularly popular, many fasters try to reduce their thirst by swimming lazily in the cool waters of the pool.

As with all Moslem occasions, the end of Ramadan is decided by the appearence of the new moon, about which there is usually a dispute. While the Sunnis recognise the Royal Observatory at Cairo as an authority on the appearance of the moon, the Shia insist that it should be seen in Bahrain. The result has often been that the Eid has started on two different days for the two sects, and in one memorable year there were three Eid days, one for each of the two sects and a third for the Ismailis, who have their own way of reckoning dates.

A three day holiday follows Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, during which there are great celebrations and much visiting of neighbours to wish them "Eid-Kum Mubarak" (Happy Holiday), the answer to which is "Aadana Allah Ala Amthaleh." On the Eid the Ruler receives visitors at the Palace. The Eid is particularly colourful owing to the bright new clothes which are worn by the children. The boys wear new white thobes and bright-coloured silk caps and the girls proudly appear in gold-decorated dresses. In many cases small boys go calling with their parents, eagerly clutching handfuls of sweets as they leave their various hosts. Local bands, composed of the negro inhabitants of Bahrain, pass through the streets of the towns and villages playing tunes on their locally made instruments. These include many types of drums, flutes, lutes and a local form of bagpipe made from the stomach of a sheep. As the bands of players go from house to house they are tipped by the owners, who often, if they are wealthy, provide a meal for the musicians.

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NEW YEAR'S DAY

It is the custom in Bahrain on New Year's Day of the Christian Calendar for groups of Bahrainis of African origin to form into bands and go playing through the streets of Manama. These men, who to day are the same as all other Bahrainis, are descended from freed slaves or were themselves slaves who escaped to Bahrain and were manumitted. In gratitude for their freedom they thus celebrate New Year's Day. They play first at H.B.M.'s Political Agency and the Adviserate and on leaving these places they split up into smaller parties to serenade their friends. Around Bahrain flags, borne by the leaders of the musicians, these people, both men and women, dance steps and play the music which was brought many centuries ago to Bahrain by their African ancestors. In the music to which they dance the rhythm of the drum plays an important part, but to a European it may seem strange that the drummers frequently leave off playing whenever they feel tired, or if they want to talk to a friend or drink a cup of tea or coffee, and when the distraction is over they again join the band.

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It has occasionally been stated in newspapers and even recently in a book on Bahrain by some one who should know better that slavery still exists not only in the Persian Gulf but also in Bahrain. The celebrations of these Bahrainis at their freedom are proof enough that in Bahrain at least slavery is a thing of the past.

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THE HAJJ

The Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca which, according to his religion, every Moslem who is able to do so must perform once at least during his lifetime. The pilgrimage takes place during the month of Dhul Hajj. The pilgrims, many of whom have reached Mecca by most hazardous routes, wearing the two white unseamed garments that are mandatory, perform the various rites of the ceremony which includes the circumambulation of the Kaaba, pilgrimages and visits

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796 788 to various points in the neighbourhood of Mecca connected with the life of the Prophet Muhammad and drinking the water of Zamzam Well. On the last day of the ceremony the pilgrims stand before Ararat, a small mountain near Mecca, and throw stones at various places to symbolise the stoning of the devil. On the 10th Day of Dhul Hajj a great feast takes place. The pilgrims remove their pilgrim's garb and throughout the Moslem world there is feasting and visiting.

796 535 In Bahrain, Eid al-Adhar is celebrated for three days, the 10th, 11th and 12th of Dhul Hajj. In former days there were very colourful scenes and ceremonies at this feast, the retainers of the Ruler used to perform war dances in front of the palace, discharging their ancient rifles into the air, and occasionally at an unlucky member of the audience. The divers, who returned home during the Eid, danced in huge groups for the entertainment of the people and were feasted in the houses which they visited, but today the Ruler has few casual retainers and the Bedouin, who were the mainstay of the dances, have settled down and become ordinary citizens. Arab dances are therefore a [517] thing of the past and the men who used to perform in them now find their amusements in attending football matches and cinemas.

MUHARRAM

796 The circumstances that brought about the division of the majority of Moslems into the Sunni and Shiite sects have been mentioned in Chapter II. The battle of Kerbela is still recognised by the Shia of Bahrain as a day of mourning for the martyrs who were killed.

During the first nine days of the month of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic year, there is a general mourning among the [346] Shia for their loss. In the Bahrain martams, which are religious meeting houses not to be confused with the mosques, preachers tell the story 796 of the growth of Islam and the way in which Ali and his family were 537 set aside by those who became the early Caliphs. These mullas, many [781] of whom come from the Holy Cities of Iraq for the purpose, are often so eloquent that they reduce their audience to tears and wailing for the mortifications inflicted on those whom they regard as the highest of mankind after the Prophet himself. Night and day the tale is unfolded as the mullas take it in turn to preach to the assembled crowds. During the day the martams are not so full but at sunset the congregation increases as men return from their daily work. In the villages and in the towns, in the yellow light of kerosene lamps and in the glare of electricity, the story is told of those events which happened over 12 centuries ago. Many people are introduced into the story, the Old Testament prophets, the Prophet Muhammad, his family and his enemies, angels and archangels and other religious figures.

796 As the days pass the orators and their audience get more carried away so that by the 10th of the month all are ready for the next act of what has been called the "Miracle Play of Hassan and Hussein." This is the public procession of the Shia which takes place every evening

before this day, but gathers strength on the night of the 9th. As the mourners leave the martams they are joined by others, some bearing torches and others carrying models of the tombs of Ali, Hussein and the others, while small children act the parts of the children of Hussein. Bands of men perform complex dances as they beat their backs with metal whips, while others cut their foreheads with swords. Men beat their bare chests as they are led by flag-bearers who keep time for the dancers. Music is supplied by the drums and chanting which fills the air with the sound, while wailing of black-clothed women on the roof-tops of the houses lining the route adds to the noise of the procession. White horses painted red to represent the blood of the martyrs, little children carried in litters and various other figures represent events in the drama of the passion play. As the morning of the 10th breaks preparations are made for the renewal of the procession, police line the routes, by-standers gather and the members of the procession leave the martams, joined later by the Shia from the villages. Slowly the great mass of men and boys passes through the streets, often taking over 1½ hours to pass one point but always completely under control and in time with the beating of the drums and the clash of the cymbals. Each group of men is led by one who is in charge of them and sees that they keep in time. In front of the breast-beaters is a man with a flag whose duty it is to indicate where they are to stop walking and start thumping their chests, and with his flag he indicates the tempo, and all along the route the thud can be heard as thousands of brawny men crash their arms and fists against their chests. In the centre of each huge circle of chain-men are two men with cymbals; these run up and down the road beating the cymbals and shouting "Ya Hussein" as the black robed men and boys strike their naked backs with copper chains. Despite its sound, this latter does little harm to the men and it is very rare that blood is drawn.

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In former times it has been known for the man who acted the part of Yazid, the villain of the Passion Play, to have been seriously wounded by people carried away by the scene, but today Yazid no longer appears in the procession, nor does the Christian who gave water to Hussein and his people and who was formerly represented as a man with a sun-helmet, waving a whisky bottle and obviously drunk. This was in the days when the British were the only Christians in Bahrain and this was therefore considered the way in which to indicate a Christian ! Today, with the exception of the small children who are carried in litters the only person who appears in the play is Zain al-Abdin, the only adult male survivor of the massacre, who appears riding on a horse or a camel and whose part is usually taken by one of the religious teachers or their assistants.

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The procession[1] is arranged in nationalities, the Bahrainis, Persians, Qatifis and Hasawis, and the two latter groups of people come to Bahrain from Saudi Arabia, where the procession is banned. Each group, led by men with huge embroidered banners, passes along the road through rows of silent onlookers, many of whom are Sunni and

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1 [On the 10th Muharram[73] - Analyst]

796 795 who therefore disapprove of the whole affair, but it is rare that there is any trouble between the two sects, both of them having adopted the principle of live and let live.

796 In the afternoon of the 10th Muharram the more energetic members of the procession go out into the villages where similar smaller processions take place and which are often made more colourful by the use of additional model tombs which are no longer seen in Manama. In the evening, as in every evening of the first ten days of the month, those who took part in the processions are feasted in the martams, and for three more days the orators continue to preach to the people, for it was for three days that Hussein lay on the field of Kerbela. But on the 13th of the month the period of mourning ends, the "props" are returned to the various martams, the collecting boxes are again displayed in the Shiite shops, out of which some of the expenses of Ashura are paid, and the Mullas return home to Iraq.

796 609 656 Europeans are permitted to witness the procession on the 9th and 10th days of Muharram, but it is illegal to photograph any part of the procession and the State Police remove the cameras or movie-cameras and expose the film of those who break this law. In addition, unwary photographers have often been roughly handled by members of the Shiite faith, who feel that a sacred procession is not a suitable subject for casual snap-shots. It is therefore much more tactful to dispense with artificial means and to rely on one's memory for recording what is an unique occasion, for the procession has been banned in Iraq and Persia and so Bahrain is now one of the very few places where it can be seen.

CHAPTER X

BAHRAIN'S STAMPS

205 THE generally accepted date for the establishment of the first post office in Bahrain, in the town of Manama, is 1884, and as the Indian Government was at that time responsible for political relations with the Ruler of Bahrain, it naturally followed that Indian stamps were used in the Islands. It was not till 1911, however, that a formal agreement granting the British a monopoly of postal services in Bahrain was signed.

In the first instance Indian stamps were used without an overprint—Indian stamps of Queen Victoria and George V post-marked "Bahrain," and it is only possible to trace stamps used in Bahrain by the post-mark. The two most usual post-marks are a circle with bars outside and two circles with the name at the top and the date across the centre. Fortunately the word Bahrain shows up quite well in most of these, provided that there is enough of the post-mark on the stamp if the latter is not on a cover. These issues were usually limited to 3 pies, ½ anna, 1 anna and 2½ anna stamps.